

Welcome. Thank you for joining us for First Person-- Conversations with Holocaust Survivors. My name is Bill Benson. I have hosted the museum's First Person program since it began in 2000. Each month, we bring you firsthand accounts of survival of the Holocaust. Each of our First Person guests serve as a volunteer at the museum.

Holocaust survivors are Jews who experienced the persecution and survive the mass murder that was carried out by the Nazis and their collaborators. This included those who were in concentration camps, killing centers, ghettos, and prisons, as well as refugees, or those in hiding. Holocaust survivors also include people who did not self-identify as Jewish, but were categorized as such by the perpetrators.

During our program, please, send us your questions and let us know where you are joining us from in the chat. We are honored to have Holocaust survivor Rose-Helene Spreiregen share her personal firsthand account of the Holocaust with us. Rose-Helene, thank you so much for joining us and for agreeing to be our first person today.

Thank you for having me.

Rose-Helene, you have so much to share with us. We're going to go ahead and get started. You were born on March 6, 1931 in Paris, France. Before you tell us what happened to you and your family during World War II and the Holocaust, please, tell us about your family's life during the war-- excuse me, before the war.

My family immigrated from Warsaw, Poland in the late 1920s. And they came to Paris since my grandmother already had two sisters who had their family in Paris. So that's probably why they came. And of course, they left Warsaw, Poland because of pogroms and because of antisemitism. So they had to leave.

They arrived in Paris in the late '20s-- 1920s. And my mother met someone here in Paris. And she got married, oh, I guess in 1929. I was born in March 1931. And unfortunately, the marriage didn't work out too well. So she took me and left her husband. And I was an infant at the time.

I think we have a photograph of you, your mother, and your grandmother here.

Yes. This is a picture still taken in Warsaw, Poland of my grandmother and my mother. And my mother was probably then about 17 years old.

Rose-Helene, did you have other family members in Paris or elsewhere in France?

Yes. My grandmother had her two sisters living in Paris with their family. And they had come here earlier, a few years before they came. So I guess this is one of the reasons she did come here. Plus, her son, my mother's brother, came to Paris also a couple of years before they emigrated. So there was no reason for them to stay in Poland with all that antisemitism and pogroms so they left.

Rose-Helene, how did your mother support you and herself?

My mother was a dressmaker. And she tried to do her dressmaking in Paris. But it was actually quite difficult because it was a bad time. It was the-- how should I say that?

It was during the Depression, right?

Yeah, it was right in the middle of the Depression. So work was hard to get by. And it was very, very difficult for a woman-- a young woman alone who had just emigrated, didn't know the language, with a baby.

And speaking of having a baby, tell us about this picture.

This picture is my mother and me when I was probably about three years old.

Rose-Helene, as you said, times were very difficult. It was the Depression. And because it was so difficult, you would often go back and forth between your grandmother and your mother. And you also spent some time in a foster home. What can you tell us about that?

Oh, very often, I had to be in foster homes like one family would take me for a few months or for a while since my mother had to work. And it was very difficult to take care of a baby and try to work. And this is a picture of me when-- I guess about the same time as you saw the previous one with my mother. I was, again, about three years old. And this was taken at one of the foster places where I was for a short time.

When I got older, my mother decided to put me in a foster. It was actually a foster home where it was a Jewish foster home, where there were lots of Jewish children. I was then about five and a half years old. And I stayed there until the beginning of the war, when I was about eight, on and off.

And I say, on and off because sometimes, my mother couldn't pay the tuition. So I had to get back to be with my mother or my grandmother. So I had to be going back and forth very often. But mainly, I was in this foster house. And life was not so much fun for a young child not having any siblings. And I was among the youngest there. So it was difficult for me.

And tell us a little bit more about what that experience was like for you in the Jewish foster home or a boarding home that you were in at age five and a half.

It was-- there were several things. First of all, I was very lonesome because I didn't have siblings. I was among the youngest ones. And also, on some days, parents would come to visit their children. And there was this beautiful large park. And they would come in and visit. My mother couldn't come very often to visit me on a Sunday.

So in the kitchen, they asked for volunteers to help with doing dishes on Sunday afternoon. And I volunteered. The problem was that you had to be six. And I was five and a half. So I had to lie because it was less painful to be in the kitchen, not seeing all the other parents coming to visit children.

And one day, my mother came to visit. And the first thing I said-- obviously, I was so happy to see her. But the first thing I said to her, I asked her how old am I exactly? And she said, five and a half. And I said, if anyone asks you how old I am, please tell them I'm six. I am not sure if she understood why. But she didn't ask, as far as I can remember.

And that meant it was OK for you to do the work in the kitchen.

Yes. So I could go back to drying the dishes in the kitchen because I was too young to do anything else. So they only gave me dishes to dry.

Rose-Helene, you've shared with me that the pain of not feeling wanted and feeling lonely did have the effect of making you a terrific student. Will you tell us about that?

What it did make me do is work a lot harder in school. And I guess, I became a very good student. We used to go to school not on the premises, but we went to town. There was a public school. And I think I was a very, very good student because I had to work very hard. But this was to compensate for what I didn't have anyplace else. So I guess that was one of the things which was very helpful for me.

In fact, what would turn out to be a painful memory later was really tremendous at the time, when you got a really exceptional award.

Yes. The last year that I was in that school was July 1939 just before the war started. And I got several prizes. I got three first prizes for different things. I can't even remember what they were. I think one was for calculus, one was for drawing.

But the main thing, my special thing, was that I got the prize of excellency, which was very, very special. It was a big, large, red book. And it was gilded. It really was so beautiful. It was my prize possession. And I was so proud to have

gotten it.

And we'll hear about that again a little bit later. Before we go on, Rose-Helene, I'd like to welcome viewers that we have watching and listening to you today from around the country, and in fact, from around the world. We have people today from New Mexico, Michigan, Georgia, and Utah. And our international viewers are watching from Sweden, Colombia, Argentina, and France.

And we also have a comment to share with you. Rosemary writes, dearest Rose-Helene, I am in awe of your fortitude and grace in the midst of horrors of your youth. I cannot understand the hatred of that time, but know that your life is an example is humbling.

Thank you.

Rose-Helene, World War II, of course, began September 1, 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. Fearing German attacks, you, your grandmother, and cousin Bernard relocated to the French countryside, while your mother remained in Paris. Where did the three of you go? And maybe start by telling us about this photograph.

Well, the French authorities in Paris feared that there would be bombing and gas attacks like there were in the First World War. So they decided to evacuate all the people and children out of Paris in a town. And we went. We were evacuated in a place called Savigny-sur-Braye. And we were there for quite a few months. We left, I guess, in September of 1939 and I was there until May 1940.

We went to school. Things were reasonably normal. It was-- we didn't feel that there was a war, there was anything going on. And we were too young, I guess, to understand. I am here with my grandmother and my little cousin, Bernard. And that's me when I was eight, eight and a half or so.

Tell us just a little bit about your cousin Bernard.

My cousin Bernard was-- we were very close to each other because I didn't have any siblings. And he didn't either. He was the son of my mother's brother. And we were a lot together. We did a lot together, were in hiding together. We were evacuated together. I was very, very close to him. We were very, very close. We always were until, unfortunately, he died a few years ago of ALS. And he was gone in 10 months.

But you'd stayed close all that time.

All the time, all the time. We were very, very close. When I came to Paris, I always stayed with him. It was-- this was-- it was like my brother.

Right, right. Rose-Helene, war came to France in May 1940, when Germany invaded France and other nearby countries. As a result, there was a mass exodus of people, including your mother, fleeing Paris for other parts of France. What do you recall about the refugees that were passing through your town?

What happened as the Germans started to invade the northern countries, like Belgium, the Netherlands, and then, of course, they started with the northern part of France. And people were absolutely terrified and started to flee. It was a horrible, horrible exodus. In this picture, you can see, people were just fleeing with what they had on horse and wagons, or bicycles, or whatever. They piled up their belongings. And you can see here, some dogs are under this big carriage. People were just absolutely terrified, not knowing where they were going. They were just trying to leave those cities that-- where they were in.

And it happened that they were coming through, coming down south, they were coming to Savigny-sur-Braye. They had absolutely nothing. So my grandmother would try to give them some water, some bread, or whatever we could give them. They were just going aimlessly. It was absolutely horrible to see this. You can-- if you have seen the news, actually, of Ukraine at the beginning, it may ring a bell. You may see what I'm talking about. This is actually what I saw.

Yeah. And as part of that exodus, that mass exodus from Paris included your mother. And she joined you in Savigny-sur-Braye. And she got-- she was wounded. Tell us what happened. My mother came to visit us in May of 1940. It was a very unfortunate time because there were some bombings in the little town when the Germans were starting to come down.

And my mother got wounded by a shrapnel. The doctors were gone in the town. And it was-- she needed to be taken care of. So she decided to get back to Paris. And she took me with her. And all these people on the exodus were coming down. And we were trying to get back up to Paris.

And the journey was extremely, extremely difficult and dangerous, also because there were bombings. There were fightings. It was usually, I think, German airplanes and British airplanes. And once in a while, as we were walking and trying to make our way on this narrow road, we had to take shelter in the ditches while this was going on. And then when it was over, we'd get back on the road. And people were starting to move again in whatever direction they were going.

I'm just trying to visualize the extreme difficulty of clogged roads, with people going in one direction. And there you and your mother are, trying to make it. But you did make it. You got back to Paris. And then when did your grandmother and your cousin Bernard get back to Paris?

My grandmother and my cousin Bernard came probably a couple of weeks later. I can't remember exactly when they came back. But they came back after us, obviously. We had gone back during the exodus, which was a total nightmare and so frightening. And people-- everyone was so scared. But they came back, probably, a couple of weeks later, when things got a little more settled.

Before we go on Rose-Helene, I'd like to remind our audience that please, share your questions for Rose-Helene using the chat feature. And we really hope that you will share questions for Rose-Helene so that she can respond to those later.

Rose-Helene, France was then-- after that, it was divided into two main zones-- Germany occupied the north and the Atlantic coastline, while the south remained unoccupied. A French collaborationist government known as Vichy France worked with the Germans and directly administered the south/southeastern part of the country. With the Nazis in control of Paris, severe restrictions were imposed on Jews. Tell us what you can about what that was like for you and your mother.

After the Nazis occupied Paris and the northern part of France, Jews had to register with the French police to say that they were Jews. Starting within just a very few months after the registered, lots of-- things started to become just absolutely impossible. Laws against the Jews were enacted, and things like we couldn't go in a park. We couldn't go to a restaurant. Or we couldn't go to a movie theater, couldn't go to a theater. We couldn't have a telephone. We couldn't have-- you name it, we just couldn't do anything.

It was-- it had become so difficult. We had curfew at 6:00 PM. To go shopping with our ration tickets, we only had one hour a day, from 11:00 to 12:00. And it became extremely difficult to get anything because the lines were very, very big, even with ration coupons. And by the time we-- I would get there, sometimes, the item I needed or wanted was gone.

Rose-Helene, tell us about the Star of David badge that you were forced to wear.

Yes. First, I must say that the roundup of Jews, foreign men, started in May of 1941. My uncles and cousins were arrested and were put in three different camps around Paris, which was maybe 70-60 miles from Paris in three different areas. One was Beaune-la-Rolande, one was Pithiviers, for example. My cousin Bernard's father was in Pithiviers.

And these men were in this camp from May 1941 to June 1942, where everyone was deported to Auschwitz. Of course, we didn't know it was Auschwitz at the time. And of course, no one was seen and heard from again.

And June of 1932, we were all issued three stars of David. As you see here, it says Juif, which means Jew. And all these stars of David had to be sewn on the left side of our garments. We couldn't pin them up. They had to be sewn. So it meant that in summer, you wanted to wash your blouse, or your shirt, or whatever, it had to be unsewn and then sewn up again. If you were caught just pinning up your star of David, you could be arrested, of course. And that's something you didn't want to do because you had enough chances to be arrested in any other ways.

Right. Rose-Helene, in the summer of 1942, the deportations of Jews really intensified, with large-scale systematic roundups and deportations. Your mother was warned of a roundup and quickly made arrangements for you to flee-- for you and her to flee south to the unoccupied-- for you to flee to the unoccupied south of France, with plans for you and your grandmother to follow. So your mother was going to flee and with you and your grandmother afterwards. Tell us how she was warned and what you know about how she made her plans to get out of Paris.

She-- my mother apparently knew a friendly policeman, who came to warn her the day before this roundup that there would be this massive roundup, to just not stay in the apartment because that was too dangerous. The roundups actually took place July 16 and July 17 of 1942. And actually, a few days ago, they had the commemoration of the 80 years of the roundups, the massive roundups of the Jews in Paris.

So my mother immediately tried to find someone to make a false papers. And this is the last photo I have that she had made for this French ID paper. She found a couple of friends very quickly. And they had to find someone-- can't find a name-- a smuggler--

A smuggler, passeur, yeah.

--a smuggler to take them over to the free zone. And my mother had to leave with these people. And of course, we couldn't go with her, since she had absolutely no idea where she would end up. All she wanted is to be in a free zone and then find a place. And then we would be coming to join her.

Unfortunately, it seems that the smuggler took the money from the little group, and they were betrayed, and arrested, and sent to Drancy, where it was the holding camp near Paris before they were deported. This is, I guess, people had been arrested and spewing out of trucks getting to Drancy.

OK. Once your mother was arrested, what then happened to her?

When my mother was arrested, she was sent to Drancy in this holding camp before she was sent to Auschwitz. In Drancy, they would make up convoys of men and women. And people had children. And many had children, young children. And the older ones, they were left behind to fend for themselves in Drancy.

When they had enough children, they would make another convoy, and they would all be packed up in these cattle cars. But every cattle car needed a volunteer to accompany the children. Now, apparently, my mother volunteered to accompany one of these camps-- one of these children in the cattle cars.

The way we learned about that is a few months later-- I mean, a few weeks later, as we had a very dear friend there who was deathly sick. And she had tuberculosis. And she was released, sent home, where she actually died about three months later. And she saw my mother. And she told us what had happened. Otherwise, we would never have known that she had volunteered with a convoy of children.

We also learned after the war that these convoys were-- of course the convoys were-- those wagons were closed. It was in the middle of summer. It was maybe four or five days to reach Auschwitz. They had no food. They had no water. They had no facilities of any kind. And the people, the children or the volunteers who didn't die en route, were gassed on arrival. This we learned after the war. So I guess my mother never had a chance to survive. And she was only 31 years old.

And of course, Rose-Helene, at the time, what you learned was that she had been deported and accompanied these children on a train. But you didn't know where at that time. And this that you just described, you learned much, much

later.

Let me jump in with a question or a comment from one of our viewers, Carmen. Carmen says, thank you for sharing this important history. I'm so sorry your childhood was destroyed by these events. Rose-Helene, you, with your mother gone and what you learned about her being deported in the convoy-- you and your grandmother would then spend the next year-- 13 months, in fact, in your mother's apartment in Paris under really severe conditions. Tell us what that was like.

It was very difficult because when my mother was deported, we decided with my grandmother to go live in the apartment, since there was no one there. So by bribing the concierge, we would say, if anyone comes, well, tell them that the person who lived here has been deported. And there is no one in the apartment.

So we went to live at my mother's apartment in July of 1942. And we stayed there until August 1943. My grandmother never left the apartment, but never for 13 months.

And I had stopped going to school in July of 1942 because children who were in school with a Star of David were picked up. And they were deported. So going to school was not an option anymore. So I was in charge of doing all the things which needed to be done-- go stand in line, get whatever needed to be done outside the world. That was for me to do. And I was 12 years old. I was actually 11.

11? 11, yeah.

So I had to stand in line. As I have said before, the lines were very long. And we only had an hour to do our shopping. So sometimes, I would stand in line and as-- what I needed wasn't there anymore. It had been sold.

But the people in the line were not very kind. They would talk among themselves why there was such a shortage of everything. Because, of course, the Jews were eating everything. Never mind that most of them had been deported. And they would turn to me-- here was a little girl standing in line with my Star of David. And I wish I had been able to hide it, but I couldn't.

And they would say to me, you dirty Jew. And this was the kind thing when, sometimes, they would say to me, you kike. And that was really so scary. And being so young, I really didn't know exactly who I was yet. And feeling that these adults were saying these terrible things to me, maybe they had a point. Maybe I was no good. And that was so horrible.

The immense burden of having to endure that. But yet, you still had to go out and get the necessities, like food.

I had no choice. I had to stand in these lines.

Rose-Helene, your apartment with you and your grandmother was located on a street corner. What do you remember seeing and hearing from your window?

Well, we could see two streets from the corner of my mother's apartment. And there were no cars in those days, only when trucks would come at night. We knew that they were coming, the Germans were coming to pick up some people to round them up. And it was probably people who had been denounced who were in hiding like we were. And we knew a few who were in the neighborhood.

And we would see someone getting into a truck during the night. And we said, oh, here's the Goldberg family or whoever they were. The husband that actually had already been deported, it was the wife and the children who were in hiding, like we were. And they were just arrested and, like everyone else, I guess, gone to Drancy and Auschwitz.

And there were also other times where it was extremely difficult because there were air raids. And obviously, we could not go out with the Star of David. And also, we had curfew at 6 o'clock. And it was so easy for someone to denounce us. Besides, my grandmother never left the place.

So we stayed during the bombings. And the apartment had very solid walls. But you could feel them. They were shaking from the bombings. And that was very scary as well. It was really horrible. But we couldn't go anywhere. We didn't know if we were going to be bombed. So we had to stay and wait it out.

I'm just trying to feel what that had to have been like, the terror of knowing that you could be grabbed, and taken, and deported at any time, that you could be killed by bombs. And you still had to go out and get food for you and your grandmother. Rose-Helene, your cousin Bernard and his mother managed to make it out of Paris in August 1943, 13 months after you. It was just you and your grandmother in the apartment. Your grandmother decided it would be best for the two of you to leave as well. Tell us how the two of you escaped Paris and then where you went.

Yes. Well, at some point, my grandmother decided, in August of '43, that this was getting really too dangerous, between people who were being arrested toward us and the bombings. But it was really getting to the point where we really had to leave Paris if we were going to try to survive. The rest of the family had already been arrested. And they were deported, never heard from them again.

The only ones who were still around was my aunt and my cousin, who had managed to get to the free zone, and actually had moved to different towns, until they ended up in Voiron, which was the southeast of Paris, and also, not that far from Switzerland, actually. It was-- Voiron was about 15 miles from Grenoble, if you know the area.

So my grandmother decided, it was time to join her. And we managed to get someone to make us false papers. We got someone who was with the resistance, who specialized, actually, in making false papers for people who were trying to flee. I have no idea how we got hold of that person. And we got false papers, decided to go. That was in August '43.

And we had to take a train overnight, which was another adventure, a big adventure, because the train was leaving after 6:00 in the evening. And besides, we couldn't go with our Star of David because the laws against the Jews, among them, didn't allow you to go any further than 25 kilometers out of Paris, which is about 17 miles from Paris.

So we had a wonderful neighbor who they had a laundromat. And they-- he decided to help us take us to the train station at night because it was really so scary for the two of us. And he took us with our two little suitcases. We left, as I said, two little suitcases, not knowing if it was going to be for a month or a year. And also, we didn't want to take a lot of luggage because it would have been really way too conspicuous.

So we went to the train station. And then we had to pass two checkpoints. It was the German checkpoint and the French checkpoint. The difficult part was-- the scariest part was that my grandmother, who had become, according to her French paper, French, didn't speak French that well. And if she opened her mouth, it would be a giveaway.

So I decided, in my wisdom, my 12-year-old, that maybe it would be better to tell my grandmother to make believe that she was sleeping when we had the German policeman come to check our papers. And that's what we did. When the German policeman came in, I showed him the papers. And I said, this is my grandmother here. And she is sleeping. And I really can't remember if I said to him don't wake her up-- maybe.

And he looked at the-- checked, so my grandmother, an old woman, and me. I was like a string bean and very small. And gave me back the papers and he left. And that was just wonderful, but terrifying.

But then we had to get to the next checkpoint, which was the French checkpoint, when we got to the free zone. And I had to do the same thing. I had to explain to the policeman that that was my grandmother. She was asleep. And here were the papers.

And again, he looked. And every second was like torture. I was so terrified. And he gave me back the papers. And he left. And we had passed. But it took me hours, I think, after that. I was so terrified. I was shaking. I don't think I've ever been more terrified during the whole war than during this trip from Paris.

And yet in the midst of that terror, you had the wisdom and the strength to do what you did and to concoct a way to get through safely with your grandmother-- amazing. And then you do end up in this small village and-- where living

conditions were exceptionally difficult. Will you tell us what it was like for you and your grandmother, what went on?

We arrived in Voiron to meet my aunt and my cousin. And obviously, we couldn't stay with her because they lived in a small place. And also, again, we didn't want to be too conspicuous. And we just couldn't stay with her. We had to find another place. That was extremely difficult to find a place to stay somewhere.

And we found a place. It was a warehouse, where furniture had been stored for many years. And it really didn't have anything. It had cold running water, and it had electricity, and absolutely nothing else, except lots and lots of mice. So we had to find someone to lend us a mattress and a stove to be able to heat ourselves and to cook-- and a few pots and pans. We needed, really, the minimum, since we had absolutely nothing.

And fortunately, a neighbor of my aunt, who is here with me, was kind enough to lend us a stove, and a mattress, and whatever we needed to start to be able to function slightly. The stove, of course, we didn't have coal to heat it.

So we had to go to the woods and walk for several miles to bring back big, huge branches. And we got a handsaw. We had to saw everything up in order to cook and to keep ourselves warm because that was the only way we could survive. And also, we really didn't have much money. So we had to be very enterprising.

And my aunt found me a place to work. And there was a tiny little grocery store, about maybe three miles from where we lived. And they needed someone to run it. The husband was a prisoner of war. And she was really very sick with tuberculosis. Thinking back in retrospect, I don't know how didn't get the disease because she was really sick.

So I had to run this little place. Of course, I didn't know anything about running a grocery store. It was like a 7/11, maybe. So I had to learn fast. And the other thing I had to learn fast is since we lived about three miles away, I had no transportation, of course. And she kindly lent me a bicycle.

I had never been on a bicycle before. So I had to learn fast how to ride a bicycle and to go back and forth. Plus at night, there was really no light except the tiny little light from the bicycle. And the roads were narrow. And it was a mountainous place. It really was quite frightening for a young child. And in the morning, when I came back with my bicycle, I would stop to get the assortment boxes of something that I had with all the tickets, the coupons that I had collected. And I worked there as a child, taking care of this grocery.

And 12 years old-- 12 years old, you're collecting money from people, keeping track of the accounts, going out and getting the supplies. It's just incredible. You also-- I mean, even though you worked in a grocery store, you had very little. You had to find food. Tell us about having to just harvest nuts from the forest.

Oh, we had all sorts of things that we had to do. We got, also, coupons. Being a child, I was entitled to a bar of chocolate a month. Obviously, I wasn't going to touch something so precious. So we bartered with something else that someone who needed wanted the chocolate. And I can't remember what we got for that.

My grandmother, being an adult, was entitled to have, I think, a bottle of wine a week. Obviously, we didn't drink. And she wasn't going to drink. So it-- so we bothered with this. We found someone who had lots of kids. And we got an exchange. We got some milk, which we didn't get. They got the wine. He was very happy to get the wine. And he was also happy to help us to trap our mice, which was very nice.

It was also to supplement our food, we'd go to the wood. And this was a place where they had a lot of chestnut trees in the woods. So we would go and gather chestnuts, and bring them back, and cook them. That was very nourishing. It was very helpful.

It was also an area where they had walnuts. But walnuts were not wild. They belonged into the gardens of people. But if the tree had branches overhanging on the road, whatever fell on the road was for us to pick. So we would pick some walnuts which had fallen on the road. So this was a supplement.

Also, my grandmother was very enterprising. She would go to the different merchants, like the butcher, or whoever.



And she would say, do you have anything to fix, like shirts, or sheets, or anything? There was absolutely nothing that you could buy during the war. So of course, everyone had old shirts and things which needed to be fixed.

So my grandmother would bring this back. And she would sew this by hand. She would fix it, bring it back. And when the people wanted to pay her, she said, oh, no, no, she didn't want to be paid. She wanted a little food instead, like a little meat, or a little cheese, or whatever. So that was one of our bartering arrangement. It worked out that we got some food. But it wasn't wonderful.

Rose-Helene, did people in this little community-- did they know that you were Jewish?

Absolutely not. When people asked, why would anyone come from Paris to be in a town like Voiron, we'd say, well, there were bombings. And it was very, very dangerous to stay in Paris. So we tried to flee the bombings. And that's why we were in Voiron. And of course, people believed it. We didn't have all the media, all the TV, all the radios, which would tell you more about it. So that was that.

We have a viewer from Spain with a question for you. Dear Rose-Helene, thank you for sharing your story. What gave you the strength to go through all that terror? Love from Spain.

I really didn't know that there was any other way because I had never had a very easy childhood or life. But I guess that was the thing to do. I guess, I just wanted to live. So I did what was necessary to survive.

And what's implicit in that is that you understood what was at risk, very much at a very early age. Rose-Helene, we have a video question from a student, Alex from Washington, DC. So let's hear from Alex.

Hi, my name is Alex Kirk. I'm from Washington, DC. And I attend Princeton University. A question I have for you is how did being so young during the Holocaust affect your experience? And what can you say about your experience now that you've grown older?

Alex asks, how did being so young during the Holocaust affect your experience?

It's hard to tell how it would have been if I hadn't had this. I have no idea. Obviously, it would have been a lot easier to have someone who would be taking care of me rather than for me an adult-- in fact, to be the adult to help take care of my grandmother. It was-- I-- it's a difficult question. I really don't know how it affected me. I think, probably, it made me a stronger person, but at what cost?

Rose-Helene, following the Allied invasion of France on D-Day-- June 6, 1944-- Rouen was liberated in August of 1944. Tell us what liberation was like for you. Do you remember when you thought, we are liberated? And what did that mean?

It really meant freedom. It meant that we wouldn't be scared all the time. We were lucky to be liberated in August, end of August 1944 by the American Army. And I must say that it was something wonderful because they gave us some crackers, some chocolate.

And it was just-- they gave us some chewing gum. I'd never even heard of chewing gum. I had no idea what chewing gum was. But it meant freedom. It meant that maybe things were going to start being normal again and that we may be able to get back to Paris.

And as it turned out, you couldn't get back to Paris as quickly as you thought. Why was that?

No. My grandmother was hoping to be able to get back right away. But unfortunately, the trucks and the trains had been bombed so much that they were not that many. And it became extremely difficult to get back. And many people actually wanted to get back. So we couldn't get back to Paris before November of 1944.

At that point, I went back to school immediately and tried to catch up after two and a half years of being away from

school. Fortunately, I had been a good student. So I was one year ahead of the program when I stopped going to school. And I managed to get my high school diploma in a few months, which was a miracle.

We also learned, when we came back, that my grandmother's apartment had been looted. And there was nothing left in it, including, of course, things which were very important to her-- her prayer book that she had brought back from Poland and photographs of the family.

And my prized possession of course that had been given as, I'll say, prize in 1939. And my book was gone. And that was really very sad. But of course, many other things had been taken from the apartment. And it was already rented to other people, despite the fact that we were paying rent the whole time that we were gone.

At some point, Rose-Helene, you ended up moving into your mother's apartment. And I believe, you were living on your own at the age of 16.

Yes. I couldn't, unfortunately, go back to school because I couldn't afford to do it. I needed to pay for my upkeep-- the rent, the utilities, and so on. By that time, my grandmother finally got her apartment back.

And she went back to her apartment. There was no point in not getting back to an apartment. It was absolutely impossible to find an apartment. So she went back to her apartment. And I stayed in my mother's apartment, still hoping that maybe she'd come back. And by the age of 16, I was living on my own. I had found a place to work and go to night school, since I couldn't go to normal school.

Rose-Helene, when did you give up hope that your mother would return?

After a while, people were starting-- they were coming back one or two at a time. And the flow stopped completely. And eventually, we realized that there was no way that she was coming back. And no one else was coming back. That was a given.

So and then we started to, of course, hear what happened and what camps-- of Auschwitz, which, of course, we didn't know before. When people were sent, were deported, we were told that they would be sending east to work for the war effort. But we had no idea that there were these killing camps, that people were going to be murdered, and also learned about the fact that people had volunteered-- for example, like my mother would be murdered on arrival if they were not dead when they got there. So there was not a ghost of a chance that I would ever see her again.

Rose-Helene, you and your grandmother-- of course, you survived together. Did she remain in Paris? And just tell us a little bit more about her after the war.

Yeah. She remained in Paris. And where would she go? There was no place to go. This is a picture of my grandmother and me the day I got married in October 1961. And then I left Paris, actually, the next day. But that was one of the pictures of my grandmother.

She was 80 years old, very petite, very tiny. And it was actually heartbreaking to have to leave her because I had found someone-- a wonderful young man, who I married. But unfortunately, he was American. So I had to follow him to Washington. And that was very sad.

But you did, of course, see your grandmother, yes.

Oh, yes. I saw my grandmother every year. We'd go to visit her for a couple of weeks, two or three weeks. And of course, I wrote to her every week. So we had an exchange. There was no email and there were no telephones, really. So we went out every week, no matter what.

Rose-Helene, I have just one more question for you. And that is in the face of rising global antisemitism, please, tell us why you continue to share your firsthand account of what you experienced during the Holocaust.

Well, with rising antisemitism is one of the many, many growing threats-- excuse me-- to democracy today. Historically, it has been a telling indicator and often an early warning sign of those threats. It is the reason it must be known and understood. Being a shy person, it has been very difficult to tell my story. But I must.

Most of the survivors like me will soon be gone. I tell my story because, well, more than half of Americans know nothing of the Holocaust, the systemic murder of six million Jewish men, women, and children, then a third of the world's Jewish population. I tell my story for the six million who never had the chance to tell theirs.

Rose-Helene, thank you. Thank you for continuing to share your story. Before we close, I'd like to share another comment from a viewer. This comment is from a viewer named Francis. And Francis writes, Rose-Helene, you are such a strong woman. It is amazing to hear your story. It is amazing to me that you can talk about this with such a grace and positive energy about you. Sending love to you from Chicago, Illinois.

Rose-Helene, we're almost out of time. But you make us better, individually and all of us together, by sharing your story. So thank you for doing it today and every time you do it.

Thank you.

I'd like to also take a moment to thank our donors. First Person is made possible through the generous support of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation. And I'd also like to invite you to tune again for our next program. We won't be joining you in August, but we'll be back live on September 7, 2022 at 1:00 PM Eastern Time for a conversation with Holocaust survivor and museum volunteer, Alfred MÃ¼nzer. For almost three years, Al lived in hiding with a Dutch Indonesian family in the German-occupied Netherlands. Join us to learn how he survived as a hidden child during the Holocaust. Thank you.